

The scientific PROOF that sending mothers out to work harms children - so why is the Budget penalising those who stay at home?

- **Coalition has chosen to give working mothers tax breaks**
- **Children's minister Elizabeth Truss denies trying to force mothers to work**

By Bel Mooney

This week we once again received the unequivocal message that the Government doesn't value stay-at-home mums. According to the Treasury, mothers who look after their children full-time do not need as much financial help as those who work.

These insultingly warped priorities emerged as the Coalition declared its intention to give working mothers tax breaks worth thousands to cover the costs of paying someone else to look after their children. Families where only one parent works won't get a penny.

The message is loud and clear: mothers who go back to the workplace are valued more than those who do not.

The new Budget favours mothers who go to work over those who choose to care for their children full-time

Yet in the first three years of life, a baby's developing brain doubles in size. Every tickle, every warm chuckle, every waggle of a toy is a mini-explosion of brain-power, joy and love that impacts on what happens in later years. Make no mistake: mothers and fathers are (in the words of the experts) 'growing their babies' brains'. Children's minister Elizabeth Truss has denied this new childcare plan is trying to force women back to work. But in her recent pronouncements I have searched in vain for an awareness of the fundamental needs of tiny children. It's all about market forces, parents' needs and, well, getting more mothers back to work. What's more, Truss's recent policy document More Great Childcare (who came up with such a clunky title?) proposes to reduce staff-to-child ratios in nurseries and at childminders, which means that staff will have less time to engage with each child.

Already those who care most about young children (the National Children's Bureau, for example) are in revolt. When will policymakers talk about mothering? Or acknowledge that the uniquely close relationship between a mother and her baby is vital? Getting mothers back to work has been an obsession of politicians (especially Labour) for decades. I consider myself a feminist and understand the urge (as well as the economic need) to work. But I believe we also need to ask a truly radical question: whether 'outsourcing' mothering is the best way to create a healthy society.

George Osborne's new budget, left, penalises mothers who stay at home, right

Children under three have to be spoken for since they can't speak for themselves. This may seem obvious, but the message has just been drummed into my head at the 20th anniversary conference of a small charity called What About The Children?

Its motto is 'Raising awareness about the never-changing emotional needs of under-threes in our ever-changing society'.

Let others debate the blunt economics of childcare - what really matters is how babies develop secure relationships and why that benefits us all

We can accumulate technology and work ever harder to pay for it. We can shift our expectations of what constitutes happiness and success. But do babies and toddlers change? No.

What they require from those closest to them is what they have needed for centuries: to be paid attention to and to feel secure.

Parents may work all hours to give themselves and their children a good lifestyle, but what their babies need is consistent love. Already I can hear cries of protest. I'll be accused of not understanding that poorer mothers need to work and women with careers are usually desperate to return to the workplace after maternity leave - and what's wrong with that?

It will also be pointed out that children from chaotic backgrounds are better off in nurseries. While that's true, it's also a key argument against Elizabeth Truss's plan to reduce staff-to-child ratios.

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I also know that stay-at-home dads can be just as good as mums, and that if grandparents take on childcare, then all the better.

There are no rules for family life; people muddle along and the concept of being a 'good enough' parent is wonderfully liberating. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't think about what babies need.

Successive governments have brainwashed women that being a stay-at-home mum is somehow letting the side down

The lectures I heard at the What About The Children? conference left me in no doubt that new mothers should think very carefully about their choices.

Successive governments have brainwashed women that being a stay-at-home mum is somehow letting the side down. Let others debate the blunt economics of childcare - what really matters is how babies develop secure relationships and why that benefits us all.

Twenty years ago, distinguished teacher and psychotherapist Doreen Goodman started What About The Children? in response to the horrific murder of Jamie Bulger. She expressed the view that the little boy's young killers were victims, too, because children who have their emotional needs met early in life are unlikely to become murderers. She argued strongly that children should be cared for primarily by a consistent mother figure for the first three years.

To understand the relationship between mother and baby, scientists have looked at the behaviour of the mother and the ways in which the baby responds

The great psychologist and psychiatrist John Bowlby was saying the same thing in the Fifties. His vast experience and fieldwork led him to develop attachment theory: the idea that infants need to experience a warm and continuous relationship with their mother (or permanent mother substitute) in order to thrive. He was attacked by feminists and ostracised by psychoanalysts for saying what now seems obvious: that the formation of an ongoing relationship with a child is a vital part of parenting. His work is underpinned by a vast amount of research.

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Their work highlights the potential dangers of over-reliance on nursery care for under-threes and shows a baby's brain grows new structures in response to the love and caring firmness given during its first two years of life. If you want to see a fascinating example of this in practice, go to YouTube and type 'Dr Edward Tronick + Still Face Experiment' into the search box.

It shows what happens when an attentive mum ceases to respond to her baby. It is a powerful warning of what can happen if an adult in charge of a baby doesn't really bother. You can see and hear the child's stress level rise within seconds.

I learned much about babies' separation anxiety and stress at the What About The Children? conference - and wish Elizabeth Truss had been there, too.

She'd have heard Professor Sir Denis Pereira Grey (former president of the Royal College of Practitioners), early years expert Dr Carole Ulanowsky, consultant child psychotherapist Robin Balbernie and professor of social work and psychology David Howe talk about how growing problems in society, such as depression, can be due to poor child/carer relationships and stress in the first three years. John Carnochan, a senior Scottish policeman and world-famous expert on violence, linked the terrible things he's dealt with all his professional life to the inadequate care babies get. Questioning our attitudes as a society, he seemed to think too many parents treat their children as accessories. Is that true, I wonder?

I cite those distinguished names to show this is a matter of importance and urgency. High levels of group care before the age of two have been associated with increased anti-social behaviour. A recent study found young children cared for by their mothers did significantly better in developmental tests than those in any other sort of care.

Of course, I'm not blaming any woman who wants to go back to work, but one of the most gloomy experiences I've ever had was visiting an expensive day nursery in the City of London. Rows of cots contained babies whose high-flying mothers were at work, often from 7am to 7pm.

It wasn't quite as terrible as the two crowded orphanages I went to in Romania in 1990. But, let's be honest, in both places the babies were 'parked'. They were taken care of without being cared for. Why is the Government so desperate to make this the norm?

The staff had no instinct (even if they had the time) to blow loving raspberries on tums. Or to help the babies of strangers to make sense of their own, individual precious place in the world. Sorry, David Cameron, but even you must be able to see that's far from a good thing.